

A Disputation between the Body and the Worms

One of the final adaptations of the Body and Soul theme in Middle English literature occurs in *A Disputacione Betwyx The Body and Wormes*. Although lacking the dramatic force of the best Body and Soul debates, the *Body and Worms* is notable for its elaborate dream-vision framework, which sets the poem during one of the periodic outbreaks of the Black Death, and for its inclusion of the Nine Worthies topos, which complements the fuller accounts of the Worthies found in the *Parliament of the Three Ages* and the alliterative *Morte Arthure*. The *Body and Worms* also deviates significantly from previous poems in the Body and Soul tradition in that its fundamental purpose is to inculcate understanding rather than fear. This purpose is corroborated by the fact that the manuscript, British Library MS Additional 37049, of Carthusian provenance, is an early fifteenth-century collection of pieces of didactic instruction and meditation intended for a clerical audience, possibly for novitiates. This manuscript is also acclaimed for its vivid illustrations which accompany the various didactic pieces, producing an effective combination of instructional advice and visual application. (For information on this manuscript, see T. W. Ross, *Speculum* 32 [1957], 274–82.)

The *Body and Worms* possibly reflects a conscious attempt to invert the point of view exemplified by Body and Soul debates such as *Als I lay*, for here the traditional figure of the proud knight is replaced by that of a fine lady, the torments inflicted on the Soul are replaced by the suffering of the Body, and the didactic intention is no longer to induce repentance but to generate the humble acceptance of the realities of death. Like many late medieval poems on death, the *Body and Worms* is certainly macabre, and yet the description of the dissolution of the Body in the grave is less gruesome-

ly realistic than those found in many of the thirteenth-century death lyrics. Indeed, the poem's catalogue of the attacking "worms," though fascinating, is not especially terrifying, and some modern readers may find it amusing. Although lacking in real drama, the *Body and Worms* captures the psychological movement within the mind of the lady, which results from her confrontation with the worms. Her initial repugnance toward death and the corruption of her body, and her nostalgic longing for past pleasures are replaced by her genuine acceptance of present realities and the recognition that death is a completely natural phenomenon. The poem is thus related thematically to *Death and Life*, with its even greater emphasis on St. Paul's defiant apostrophe: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (I Cor. 15: 55). (For an excellent critical discussion of the *Body and Worms*, see Klaus Jankofsky, *Taius* 1 [1974], 137–59.) In regard to the poetic style of the *Body and Worms*, it should be noted that the language of the narrative frame is far more ostentatious than that of the actual dialogue, and the style generally is reminiscent of the Lydgatian poetry of the mid-fifteenth century. The verse form is ostensibly rime royal, but it is closer to being rhymed prose.

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- 1) Base Text: British Library MS Additional 37049, fols. 33r–35r
 - 2) Other mss: none
 - 3) Printed Text: K. Brunner, *Archiv* 167 (1935), 30–5
 - 4) *Index of Middle English Verse* 1563
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A Disputacione betwyx the Body and Wormes

In þe ceson of huge mortalitie,
Of sondry disseses, with þe pestilence
Heuely reynand, whilom in cuntre

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- 1–5. Although the narrator indicates that his pilgrimage into the countryside is prompted by his conscience, the implication is clear that his flight from the Black Death is also expedient.

To go pylgramege mefeld be my conscience,
 And on my way went with spedily diligence. 5
 In a holy day afore me I sawe a kyrk
 Wher to go I dressed, my bedes to wirk,

In a wilsom felde standyng desolate,
 Vn-to here a messe was my hole intent. 10
 It was done & sayd be I come þerat;
 Oppyn I fand þe dore & entre sone I hent;
 I knelyd me downe & to my prayers went,
 With lawe obeysaunce mekyd me downe
 To ane ymage, with gret deuocione.

Bysyde me I sawe a towmbe or sepulture 15
 Ful freschly forgyd, depycte, & depynte,
 Compassed & made be newe coniecture,
 Of sondre armes þer many a prynte;
 Þe epytaf to loke was I not faynte:

4. way in margin

7. "where I prepared to go, to say my prayers"

10. *be I come*: "by the time I had come"

12-4. The ms illustration (folio 33 recto) depicts the kneeling figure of the narrator before the wounded body of Christ on the Cross; a doorway is in the background behind the cross.

15-23. These verses are illustrated in the ms by the painting of a double decker or transi tomb; on the upper tier lies the effigy of the woman, on the lower the decomposing body wrapped in a shroud and beset by an imposing host of worms and other crawling creatures. The woman is lying in state in a splendid gown and mantle, her head resting on a tasseled pillow; her eyes are open and her hands are folded on her breast in prayer. (For discussions and illustrations of such tombs, see for example Kathleen Cohen, *Metamorphosis of a Death Symbol: The Transi Tomb in the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, 1974; Erwin Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture*, 1964; Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 1957; and T.S.R. Boase, *Death in the Middle Ages*, 1972.)

18. Several memorial shields are depicted on the coffin in the ms illustration which precedes the poem; these coats of arms might offer some clue to the actual identity of the woman in the illustration, if the poet had an actual person in mind.

19. Beneath the ms illustration preceding the poem are the following verses, the epitaph

In gylt copyr with goldly schewyng þan, 20
 With a fresche fygyre fyne of a woman,

Wele atyred in þe moste newe gyse,
 With long lokkes of þis disceyfing.
 In a slomer I slept, taken I was in syche wyse,
 Rapt & rauesched fro my selfe beynge; 25
 Betwyx þis body & wormes hyr fretynge,
 Strangly ilk one oþer corespondyng,
 In maner of a dyaloge it wente;
 Perfore to þis insawmpyl 3e take intente.

21. *fyne ms*: syne

referred to here; the first four verses comprise the actual epitaph, and they convey a feeling of having been taken directly from a tomb inscription:

Take hede vnto my fygyre here abowne
 And se how sumtyme I was fressche & gay
 Now turned to wormes mete & corrupcone
 Bot fowle erth & stynkyng slyme & clay
 Attend þerfore to þis disputacione written here
 And writte it wysely in þi hert fre
 Þat þer-at sum wisdom þou may lere
 To se what þou art & here aftyr sal be
 When þou leste wenest. venit mors te superare
 When þi grafe grenes. bonum en mortis meditari

22-8. This stanza of eight verses, the only one in the poem to deviate from the rime royal scheme, is here printed as it occurs in the ms. It has very plausibly been suggested, however, first by Brunner and then more fully by Jankofsky, that several verses have been lost from the text. According to Jankofsky, "Brunner realized that something did not make sense from the point of view of content but did not look for cause. Thus he prints stanza four as having eight lines instead of seven. A closer look, however, shows that the lacuna spans two stanzas. Stanza four continues with the description of the tomb begun in stanza three but stops abruptly with the description of the lady's hair. It is relatively easy to see how the scribe . . . could have skipped a few lines, picking up again with 'wyse' (a) — stanza five — continuing with the (b) rhymes. . . . Thus crucial information for our understanding of the tomb and epitaph and their iconographic classification is missing" (*Taus* 1 [1974], 159).

24-5. This depiction of the narrator being "taken" out of himself and transported into a trance-like state may underscore the suggestion that his dream vision or somnolent meditation carries serious didactic significance.

Pe Body spekes to þe Wormes:

- [Body] "Wormes, wormes," þis body sayd, 30
 "Why do 3e þus, what causes 3ow me þus to ete?
 By 3ow my flesche is horribilly arayed,
 Whilk was a fygure whylom fresche & feete,
 Right amyabyll & odorus & swete, 35
 Beste beloved of any creature,
 Lady & soferayne cald I 3ow ensure.
- Of bewte I was a lady precious,
 Of gentil blode desendyng, of right lyne
 Of Eve, and of trewe begynyng generows;
 Al hertes glad my plesaunce to dyuyne, 40
 Men of honour & of gret worschip al dyd declyne;
 And nowe here in erth mortal deth come me to—
 Emang 3ow wormes nakyd lyg I loo!
- Most vnkynde neighbours þat euer war wrought! 45
 Dynner mete & sowper al to lyte,
 Now fretyng & etyng 3e hafe me þorow soght,
 With ane insaciabyll & gredy appetyte;
 No rest bot alway þe synk, sowke, & byte;
 Day tyme ne houre with 3ow is no abstynence, 50
 Bot ay redy agayne me with vyolence.
- When 3e fyrst began to drawe me to,
 It semes me 3e wer fed in a faynt pasture;

Now fatte waxen & vgly rownde & gret also!
 Of curtesy & gentilnes lefe of me 3our cure
 And with sum oþer dwelle & endure 55
 Whilk may 3ow rewarde with better wardone,
 For ner am I wasted, consumed, & gone."

Wormes spekes to þe Body:

- [Worms] "Nay, nay, we will not 3it departe þe fro
 While þat one of þi bones with oþer wil hange,
 To we hafe scowred & pollysched to 60
 And made als clene as we can þaim emange;
 For our labour we aske no maner of þing to fange—
 Gold, syluer, ryches, ne no oþer mede—
 Bot onely vs wormes on þe to fede,
- Whilk may not sauour ne smell in no wyse 65
 Pine orrybyll flesche, rotyng & stynkyng,
 Of al creatures hated to devyse,
 Safe onely of vs wretchid wormes beyng;
 If we, as bestes, had smellyng & tastyng,
 Trows þou þat we wald towche þi caryone playne? 70
 Nay, parde, we wald it voyde for certayne!"
- Pe Body spekes to þe Wormes:
- [Body] "Parde, vncortes 3e be vnto me,
 Pus heuely to threte me & manace
 And þus me lefe bot bare bones to see.
 Now where be 3e knyghtes, cum forth in place, 75

30. The dialogue which begins at this point is illustrated in the margins of ms folios 33v to 35r. In the first two of these four illustrations the worms occupy a position at the top of the page; in the last two their positions have been reversed. In all four illustrations the lady's skeletal corpse stands erect, wearing only the headdress depicted in the tomb illustration.

37-43. These verses convey feelings and images that closely parallel those found in the powerful Middle English death lyric "Wen þe turuf is þi tuur," *Index* 4044.

52. The worms' insatiable appetite stems from the *faynt* or "meager" pasture of their recent feeding; cf. the similar use of this metaphor by Chaucer's Host when he remarks on the *gentil pasture* in which the Monk has been feeding (CT VII, 1933).

54-6. The lady attempts to dismiss the worms in the courtly phrases she would have used with her suitors during her life, suitors whose absence she laments in ll. 75-85 below.

69-70. The distinction between the "worms" as creatures lacking senses of taste and smell and other beasts may be the poet's invention, made for its dramatic effect.

75-85. The lady's pleas for her suitors to come and defend her from the attacking worms continues her courtly rhetoric from the previous stanzas and also represents a variation on the *ubi sunt* convention.

And 3e worschipful sqwyers, both hye & base,
 Pat sumtyme to me offerd 3our seruyse,
 Dayes of 3our lyfes, of hertes frawnchsyse,

Sayng permytting 3our lyfe to myne avyse?
 To do me seruys, cum & defende nowe me
 Fro þies gret horribil wormes vgly to se,
 Here gnawying my flesche þus with gret cruelte,
 Devowryng & etyng nowe as 3e may se,
 Pat sumtyme 3e lufed so interly—
 Now socour & defende here my body!"

Pe Wormes answers to þe Body:

[Worms] "What suld þai do, lat se vs vnto;
 Of þaim drede we noght, ne of þair mone,
 For at þe vtteraunce we hafe had to do
 With alle þat wer myghty, passed forth & gone
 Afore þis tyme, hafyng þair dunacyone:
 Emproure, kynge, & conquerours alle,
 Lords temperall and spyritualle;

Pe neyne worthy, Judas Machabeus sure,
 Julyus Cesar, Godfray de Bolayne,
 Alexander, Dauyd, Ector, & Arthure,

95. Arthure ms: Athure

78-79. "for the whole of your lives, from your hearts' generosity, saying that you would govern your lives according to my judgments"

88. *at þe vtteraunce*: i.e., "from the earliest time"

90. *dunacyone*: "donation," i.e. the gift of their bodies; Brunner reads *diuiciacione*.

93-6. The Nine Worthies topos commonly occurs in conjunction with the *ubi sunt* motif and the theme of the impermanence of earthly glories. No attempt is made here to group the Worthies into the triads of Pagan, Old Testament, and Christian heroes. More extensive accounts of the Nine Worthies occur in the *Parliament of the Three Ages* (ll. 300-585) and the alliterative *Morte Arthure* (ll. 3260 ff.); for discussions of the Nine Worthies topos, see R. S. Loomis, *MP* 15 (1917), 19-27, and M. Y. Offord, ed., *Parl. of the Thre Ages*, *EETS* 246 (1959), xl.

Kyng Charls, Duk Josue þe captayne;
 With al þe Troiane knyghtes most souerayne;
 With fayr Elyn bewtyuows of vysage,
 Pollysene, Lucres, Dydo of Cartage;

Pies & oþer war also fayr as 3e,
 3it durst þai not styr ne mofe in no wyse
 When possession on þaim taken had we;
 For al venomos wormes to devyse
 Acowmpenyd ar to þat seruyse,
 With vs for to halde ar þai set fully,
 3ow vnto devowre & waste vttyrly:

Pe cokkatrys, þe basilysk, & þe dragon,
 Pe lyserd, þe tortoys, þe coluber,
 Pe tode, þe mowdewarp, & þe scorpyon,
 Pe vypera, þe snake, & þe eddyr,
 Pe crawpaude; þe pyssemoure, & þe canker,
 Pe spytterd, þe mawkes, þe evet of kynde,
 Pe watyr leyche, & oþer ar not behynde."

Pe Body spekes to þe Wormes:

[Body] "Remedy can I fynde none in no wyse,
 Socowre ne no relese in no stownde,

98-9. Because the body is that of a woman, the poet also includes examples of the transience of feminine beauty. The four he selects — Helen of Troy, Polyxena (the daughter of King Priam of Troy), Lucretia (a virtuous Roman wife who killed herself after being raped), and Dido — are also among the female martyrs of love that Chaucer selected for inclusion in the *Legend of Good Women*.

107-13. The nineteen creatures in the catalogue of the "worms" reflect the poet's familiarity with bestiary lore. With the sole exception of the mole (*mowdewarp*), all of these creatures appear in the bestiaries among the "reptiles and fishes." The cockatrice and basilisk, fabulous creatures like the dragon, were sometimes considered to be identical, though a distinction is implied here. The basilisk was able to poison its victims merely by a look. *Coluber*: snake; *mowdewarp*: mole (moldiwarp); *crawpaude*: crab; *canker*: crab; *spytterd*: spider; *mawkes*: maggots; *evet*: newt. (On medieval bestiaries, see for example *The Bestiary: A Book of Beasts*, ed. T. H. White [New York, 1954].)

114-20. In this single stanza the Body begins the process of resigning itself to the realities of the grave. It should be noted that the speeches assigned to the Body follow a clear structural pattern; the first three have four stanzas, then two stanzas, then one stanza; the second three consist of one stanza, then two stanzas, and finally four stanzas. The two single stanza speeches represent the turning point in the disputation.

Bot in þis case must I go after þair devyse,
 Porowly gnawen my flesche & sore bownde,
 For þai ar hateful to lyfes kynde fownde.
 What sal I do bot lat þaim hafe þair wyll?
 Aventure me must abyde þof þai do me spyll!" 120

Pe Wormes answers to þe Body:

[Worms] "Pe fyrst day þow was borne our mesyngers we sende;
 Vnto þaim we gaf in our commawndement
 As in charge þai suld vs not offende,
 Ne not departe fro þe to deth on þe went;
 Pe to frete & to gnawe was oure intent, 125
 And after come with þe to our regyowne,
 Pi flesche here to hafe for þair warysowne,

Whilk has obeyde our commaundment,
 Of þis may þou on no wyse say nay;
 Bot þat sum both þi wombe & stomak hent, 130
 Owdyr lyce or neytes in þi hede alway,
 Wormes in þe handes, flees in þe bedde I þe say,
 With oþer venomosnes, dyuers & sondry,
 To warne 3ow of vs to make 3ow redy."

Pe Body spekes to þe Wormes:

[Body] "Now knawe I wele 3our mesyngers þai were, 135
 Pe whilk with me in lyfe kepyd resydence;
 No langer wil I dispute þis matere,
 Nor debate, bot suffer 3our violence.

135. mesyngers *ms.* mensyngers

130-7. The description of these harbingers of the death-worms provides a telling commentary on the inescapable realities of medieval life, even for fine ladies.

Do 3our will with me at 3our beneuolence;
 Bot 3it in the Sawter Daudid says þat alle 140
 Sal be obedyent vnto mans calle."

Pe Wormes awnswers to þe Body:

[Worms] "Pat power dures whils man has lyfe;
 In þis wrechid warld here ar þai þe apon;
 Now þi lyfe is gone, with vs may þou not stryfe;
 Pou art bot as erthe & as þinge to noght gone; 145
 Lyke as I þe sayd was in þine aduencione,
 Of Lentyn comynge þe Ask Wedynsday,
 When þe preste with asses crosses al way,

And with asses blisses, to hafe rememoraunce
 What þou art & wher to þou sal turne agayne; 150
 For asses þou was afore þis instaunce,
 And asses sal þou be after for certayne.
 Be þou lord, lady, or hye sufferayne,
 To powder & dust in tyme to cum þou sall;
 Of worldly goynforth swylk is þi entyrvall." 155

Pe Body spekes to þe Wormes:

[Body] "Allas, allas, now knaw I ful well
 Pat in my lyfe was I made lewyd & vnwyse,
 With a reynawnde pryde so mykil for to mell,
 For myne abowndant bewte to so devyse;
 To prowde hafe I bene, to wanton, & to nyse, 160
 In worldly pleasaunce gret delyte hafyng,
 To be my comper none worthy þinkyng.

140-1. Psalms 8:4-8, especially verse 6.

143. "Here in this wretched world (i.e., the grave) they rule over you."

145-55. These verses reflect such passages of scripture as Gen. 3:19 and Eccles. 3:20, which underlie the liturgy for Ash Wednesday.

162. "thinking that no one was worthy to be my equal"

And now soget to wormes I am beynge
 Beryng þair preue mesyngers dayly,
 As loppes & lyce & oþer wormes right commerowsly, 165
 Vnknewyng fro whyne þai come trewly.
 To þis can I say no more vttyrly,
 Bot arme me I must with gode sufferaunce
 Oure Lordes will to abyde with al þe circumstaunce."

Pe Wormes awnswers to þe Body:

[Worms] "By þis sufferaunce of vs no thanke gyt zee, 170
 For by zour wil lyfed hafe euer ze walde;
 Rememor ze sal with will of zour hert fre
 In holy scripture, & ze wole behalde
 Pat þe fayrnes of women talde 175
 Is bot vayne þinge & transitory;
 Women dredyng God sal be praysed holy."

Pe Body spekes to þe Wormes:

[Body] "3a, now is to late tyme paste to call agayne,
 As now at þis stownde, bot put me onely
 In þe mercy of our Lord God most sufferayne, 180
 Whilk is for þe best so to do sothely,
 And þat þos on lyfe may hafe space to be redy
 To rememor in þe same wyse also,
 Contynewly þinkyng in þe tyme to cum þerto.

What he salbe & also what is he,
 Be it he or sche, be þai neuer so fayr, bewar 185

164. mesyngers *ms.*: mensyngers

165. *commerowsly*. The rhyme scheme calls for a word ending in *-ing*.
 172-6. Proverbs 30:31.
 185-8. Possibly a reference to Mark 7:20-3.

Of pryde with his felows þat noght be,
 Pe whilk oft men brynges in to care,
 As scripture mencion makes þe soth to declare;
 Perfore gode is to avoyde fleschly temptacone,
 By þe feende our foo both wroght & done. 190

Pis þat I hafe complened & sayd,
 In no displesyng take it zow vnto.
 Lat vs be frendes at þis sodayn brayde,
 Neghbours, & luf as before we gan do;
 Let vs kys & dwell to-gedyr euermore, 195
 To þat God wil þat I sal agayn vpryse
 At þe day of dome before þe hye justyse,

With þe body glorified to be,
 And of þat nowmbyr þat I may be one,
 To cum to þat blis of heuen in fee, 200
 Porow þe mene & þe mediacione
 Of our blissed Lord, our verry patrone,
 Par in abilitie to be for his hye plesaunce.
 Amen. Amen. pour charite at þis instaunce."

Now spekes he þat sawe þe vysion:

[Narrator] With þis I woke fro slepe sompnolent, 205
 Or of a slomery meditacone;

199. of *in margin*

186. "(Beware of) Pride and his good-for-nothing companions" (the other six of the Seven Deadly Sins).

193. *at þis sodayn brayde*: i.e., "for this brief time"

193-5. Cf. Job 17:14.

195. The Body's invitation to kiss the worms symbolizes the full awareness she has achieved of the need for Christian reconciliation. She has transcended entirely her initial repugnance of these agents of physical corruption.

196-7. Cf. Job 19:26; Psalm 49:14; I Cor. 15:51-5.

196. *to þat*: i.e., "until that time when"

To a holy man of hye excellent
 Mefed I þis dreame & strange vysion,
 Whilk bad me put it vndir scripcion,
 Als nere as I cowde remembyr me verely, 210
 In als fayir langage as I cowde godely,

Vnto þe reders þinge delectabyll,
 And a monyscyon both to styr & to mefe
 Man & woman to be acceptabyll
 Vnto our Lord, & al lustes for to lefe 215
 Of warldly þinges, whilk dos þaim grefe,
 And þe more rather to call vnto mynde
 Oure Saueour & to Hym vs bynde. Amen.

Winner and Waster

Winner and Waster, the first of the three Middle English alliterative debates, is also one of the earliest works of the Alliterative Revival. The poem's many references to contemporary social and historical matters point to 1353 as a likely date of composition, a specificity in dating which is unusual for medieval texts. *Winner and Waster* is also unusual in synthesizing elements from several genres and modes—debate, dream vision, allegory, satire, the political-historical poem, and the complaint about the times. Like many of the poets in the alliterative tradition, the *Winner and Waster* poet is skilled in sustaining vivid passages of description, but he is exceptional among them for his ability as a satirist; at times he attacks the object of his anger with the directness of Langland, at times he manifests a satiric subtlety and wit-tiness that is almost Chaucerian. *Winner and Waster* is a sophisticated poem, to be sure, and it is also a difficult one. Some of its contemporary allusions are still obscure, and the only extant text of the poem is incomplete and thus inconclusive. Still, there can be little doubt that the poet's primary object is to decry the social and economic instability of the times, a state of affairs largely resulting from Edward III's commitment of resources to the Hundred Years War with France.

The somber prologue establishes the poem's tone of moral condemnation. In the manner of a "complaint against the times" (cf. Chaucer's lyric "Lak of Stedfastnesse"), the speaker inveighs against the present perversion of traditional values and ideals, even suggesting that the end of the world may be approaching. The corruption of the age is also reflected, he suggests, in its failure to value the work of true poets, which has given way to more frivolous forms of entertainment. The speaker is confident, neverthe-

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John W. Conlee

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